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UNCLAS YEREVAN 001148

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR EUR/CACEN, DRL

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [AM](#)

SUBJECT: TWO MEN DETAINED ON CHARGES OF ATTACKING JOURNALISTS

1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified, protect accordingly.

SUMMARY

2. (SBU) The Office of the Procurator General (PG) announced May 12 that they had identified and officially charged two men for attacking journalists during an opposition rally on April 5. An assaulted journalist had identified one of them as the man who stole her camera and knocked her to the ground. The two men will likely be charged with "hooliganism," a charge that can carry up to five years of prison. The opposition press has called on the authorities to identify those who ordered these two to disrupt the April 5 rally. End Summary.

EGGS, FIRECRACKERS, AND BROKEN CAMERAS

3. (SBU) The PG's office announced May 12 that they have detained two unemployed men, Ashot Avetisian and Hrair Harutyunian, for allegedly attacking journalists during the April 5 opposition rally held by the National Unity Party in Yerevan. The rally was disrupted when roughly two dozen men started to throw eggs at party leader Artashes Geghamian and then set off firecrackers. Photo and TV journalists who filmed the disruption had their cameras smashed by a group of "well-built thugs" with shaven heads. The incident was widely covered by TV and print media; several TV channels and opposition newspapers carried some of the disrupters' photos for few days.

INITIAL POLICE INACTION

4. (SBU) According to eyewitness accounts the police, led by Deputy Police Chief Hovhannes Varian, stayed idle and simply watched the whole scene unfold. Some reporters and politicians speculated that the attackers were bodyguards of Armenian oligarchs, fueling wide-spread rumors that the incident may have been orchestrated by the authorities. (Note: A slightly different, but equally plausible version, was provided by a senior GOAM official to us informally. He claimed that one press photographer started snapping pictures of the private goons on stand-by at the edge of the crowd. One of them took umbrage and seized camera and photographer. Attracted by the commotion, other photographers moved in to cover the scene, and the other goons joined their colleagues in destroying the film and cameras -- with attendant personal violence. Our source did not know the goons' affiliation, but seemed convinced they belonged to one or more prominent oligarchs. In this version, there was no direct connection between the egg-throwers and those who attacked the journalists. End Note.)

COMMENT: IT'S A START

5. (SBU) Thus far the PG's office has detained two alleged perpetrators; according to the PG's statement, the suspects have already been interrogated and confessed. Aravot daily correspondent Anna Israelian recognized one of the suspects, Hrair Harutyunian, as the man who stole her camera and knocked her to the ground. The PG's office announced that the two suspects will be charged with "hooliganism," a Criminal Code Article that carries up to five years of imprisonment. The opposition press, meanwhile, is calling on the authorities to identify those who ordered Avetisian and Harutyunian to disrupt the rally. Human rights activists and opposition supporters will be watching this case closely to judge how committed

the government is to pursuing those responsible for the
April 5 events.
ORDWAY